

## What "Visual Studies" Is

This book is nominally a response to visual studies, and an attempt to bring it forward. Because visual studies was the book's starting point, it make be helpful to note some salient characteristics of the field.

Visual studies has grown exponentially in the last twenty years. In the early 1990s, it was a new subject, and it seemed fairly straightforward. Its mission was to complement art history's interest in fine art with a new attention to television, advertising, photography, and mass media. To do that, it used a group of theorists that had often been overlooked by art history, with special focus on certain texts by Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan. In the last few years, visual studies has become remarkably complex.

Geographically, visual studies has been expanding so rapidly no scholar has been able to trace it. Elements of visual studies curricula are pursued in Baroda, Basel, Bogotá, Beijing, Brussels, and Bergen. It would probably be possible make an alphabet of places visual studies is taught. There is a "Q," Quito, and perhaps even an "X," Xian Jiaotong University. It was Nicholas Mirzoeff who first noted that visual studies includes is taught on five continents. At the same time, visual studies isn't everywhere. It's scarcely taught in Africa, and it would not be possible to make an alphabet of countries where you could learn visual studies. Still, visual studies is a nearly ubiquitous companion, and sometimes rival, to art history, design, visual communication, and a number of fields that are already staples of international university education. In *Visual Studies* I suggested there are three regional forms of visual studies: Anglo-American, German-language, and Latin American, with separable concerns and bibliographies. Now I think that there may be five or six partly distinct practices, including at least five meanings given to *Bildwissenschaft*, and another half-dozen meanings given to allied terms such as *Kunstwissenschaft* and iconology.

Historically, visual studies used to be understood as an outgrowth of British cultural studies in the 1960s. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and others were its touchstones. Recently, scholars have become more attentive to the multiple histories of the field. One such history begins in the 1970s in Sweden, particularly in Göteborg and Lund; interpretations developed there have grown into a kind of semiotic analysis of non-art images. Another history begins with Aby Warburg and Alois Riegl, and leads through German-language art history to what is currently called

*Bildwissenschaft*. A third history leads from postcolonial studies, visual anthropology, area studies, and other fields, and converges on publications such as the *Journal of Visual Culture*. A fourth comes to visual studies through deconstruction and literary criticism, by way of Marshall McLuhan and Fredric Jameson. These and several others are now recognized as the multiple parents of practices that might very well not be a coherent whole.

In these four ways, visual studies has become something very different from what it was in the early 1990s. It may not even be the same subject. This book does not address those issues. Here the expression "visual studies" is used loosely, in a pragmatic fashion, to denote a conglomeration of mainly Anglo-American books and essays, texts, and authors. Most of these are enumerated in *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (2003), but they also include *Images: A Reader* (2006), the second edition of *Practices of Looking* (2009), *Visual Literacy* (2008), and the interviews in *Visual Culture Studies* (2008). At the same time we recognize other senses of "visual studies" and other terms—"visual culture," "visual culture studies," "image studies" "iconology," "visual communications," and *Bildwissenschaft*: they matter less in this book than the individual problems, works, texts, concepts, and analyses.